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Challenges faced by educational leadership on influencing student learning

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Abstract

The paper is a study stating the roles and contribution that some essential factors have on determining the quality of the learning for a student. Some of the main questions this article is trying to answer are whether the impact of educational leadership is important for improving learning, as well as what the essentials of quality leadership are. Some of the major challenges having a significant impact on student learning are school conditions, teachers, as well as student background and last but not least, the government policies and school approaches.

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1. Introduction

Education is essential and a *sine qua non* condition in order to provide the chances and perspectives envisioned in a competitive and quality demanding labour market for each of a country's individuals and for the country itself in an emerging global environment. Whether the future graduates are bound to success and whether their educational culture has made them acquire skills for becoming prospective workmen, men of great success, even leaders is a matter to deal with for each individual.

Educational leadership is a term that has to do mainly with the duties and responsibilities of the leadership team in order to improve school management, as well as students' achievement. In order to enhance and improve school leadership, the persons in charge with school administration, comprising the principal, deputy manager, teachers, have to attend effective training, to be provided with updated and useful data that will allow them to identify the strong and weak points in learning and teaching, as well as the auxiliary activities leading to it.

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2. Short history of Romanian educational system

Romanian school, a traditionally Eastern Europe - oriented organization lasting for over 50 years, needed a thorough change in infrastructure, mentality, outcomes and learning and teaching approaches. This change and reform had to start from inside out. After more than half of a century of continuous teacher-centred learning system and strict rules which schools, teachers and students have been abiding, twenty years (that is after 1990) seems a small period of time to really allow for improvement, modern teaching and learning systems, transformational educational leadership. According to Pontea (1989), in 1989 new school pattern implementation had to be made by means of and through people in the educational system, no interference from other local or social structures, while some others say that a problem is more objectively seized by an outsider, so it is difficult to believe that those who had grown up and developed themselves along with the system may drop it and quickly embrace some ideas they have not previously tested themselves. Therefore, at national level it has been decided that only well prepared teaching staff should be able to provide a managerial school plan, being further submitted to a commission within the County School Inspectorate, which will eventually decide to appoint the respective candidate as a school head master. That was the procedure twenty years ago as well.

2.1 Steps towards european integration of the educational system

As nowadays good information leads to good progress and maintaining updated means in line with current trends, the managerial team in a school needs to have good and useful information in order to make practical decisions on how to use the available resources, how to attract new resources and means intended to enhance school rating and school activities, as well as how to plan professional and educational development. Educational policies and practices are oriented towards a radical school reform; the educational reform initiatives have thorough curricula revision for improvement and more focus on students' achievement both at an educational level as well as social and cultural development, as recommendations, which are school priorities and responsibilities. As Cristea (1996) states, school should train students for life; their efforts should be rewarded both at an educational level as well as at a social and cultural one. Such initiatives develop at a national level and the government policy makers are in favour of setting as goals in the educational system the key factors that will help student reach high performance and will also allow them to engage themselves into the social national environment. From this point of view, this is the first step towards setting the basis of education, through a process based on minute prospection on performance factors in education and culture, as well as specific instructional strategies.

But besides well planned and well designed activities, besides well organized management plans, when it comes to putting into practice the stated goals, less than 25 % of the elected school principals succeed in implementing their long – term or short –term strategies. If such is the case and it has been the case for over a decade, which is the strategy that works, what are the factors of success and what draws down a well thought educational development plan?

3. Main factors of an improved educational system

A research was conducted, whose main purpose was to find out the answer to these questions. The school elects a head master, a principal every four year. Twenty elementary schools were invited to take part in this research and openly express their point of view and provide information in order to improve questionnaires. All twenty schools are urban schools and that is why some factors such as students' social background and educational means were not taken into account. Why elementary schools were preferred to the detriment of other schools or colleges? Because later on school performance started from elementary schools, the future characters and the future working men build up their cultural and educational background at this stage and age.

The paper states the roles and contribution some essential factors have on determining the quality of the educational act of learning for a student. Some of the main questions the article is trying to answer are whether the impact of educational leadership matters in improving learning and what the essentials of quality leadership are. Some of the major challenges having a significant impact on student learning are school conditions, teachers and student background and last but not least, the government policies and school approaches.

At the beginning, in the middle (after two years) and at the end of the four year mandate a set of questionnaires was completed by each school leaders team and every time the results were compared and the answers provided, as well as the points of view led to the next set of upcoming questionnaires. If the practice showed and proved a successful way of implementing the educational plans, it is a matter of individual interpretation, even if conclusions led to some good practice and bad practice pointed remarks.

This paper will only show the main conclusions of the research and will focus more intensely on commenting the pros and cons that, in our opinion, make the difference between effective educational leadership and failure of leadership. The study undertaken demonstrated a strong, positive link between educational leaders - particularly principals - and student learning outcomes. The outcomes provide vital information for educational leaders to help students succeed and to make a high performing school.

How leadership or whether leadership influences student learning and what factors lead to students' performance represented the main subject of the research and the findings were unexpectedly interesting. Other direct or indirect effects of leadership on student learning are also presented.

3.1 Policies and professional standards

A first comparison made at the beginning at the research between all the twenty answers showed that the majority, that is more than 80 % of the newly elected principals had included the following in their educational plan: creating or improving infrastructure and conditions that would enhance both teaching and learning, providing the teaching staff with the necessary training and educational support to ensure teaching performance and last, but not least promoting the school objectives of performance and achievement through students outcomes. This is what the literature describes as "participative" leadership, where the principal and the leadership team are concerned on how to make decisions about the learning and teaching process improvement and about ranking the school. The other almost 20 % were re-elected principals whose main goals were to establish some high expectancy results from improving the curricula and the classroom practices with teachers (the infrastructure having been created during the first four-year mandate). This is what we call "instructional" leadership, a term that has been used for decades, but now and here no longer covers the needs for an effective school leadership.

New appointed principals have encountered a lot of obstacles, as those mentioned above, which they had to overcome in order to succeed in implementing the new school reform: traditional organizational structures, policies and professional standards that created obstacles in restructuring of working conditions and system; in this regard, it was created a monitoring strategy that would focus on and supervise progress achieved on aligning curriculum, teaching and learning aids, pedagogical approaches and student assessment with actual standards. Insufficient data regarding the actions meant to allow a strategic involvement in the reform efforts (reconfiguring existing organizational structures and budgets, identifying the resources for allowing assessment of students' performance, establishing a clear focus on attaining high standards for students achievement) was a problem solved with an accountability system that was so created as to allow tracking of students progress, to provide information about school, students, teachers performance, to identify the faults and improvement of school measures.

Those principals who were appointed under previous regime have identified, as major challenges, achievement of new standards and expectations for successful leadership in influencing student learning; successful schools have pointed the instructional quality as an essential key to improving student learning;

standards set for the curriculum content, student achievement, teachers competence, instructional skills and school performance were also some essential factors identified that led to a successful school reform, that would allow student learning improvement.

3.2 *School reform: opportunities and obstacles*

Those principals who were appointed under previous regime have identified, as major challenges, achievement of new standards and expectations for successful leadership in influencing student learning; successful schools have pointed the instructional quality as an essential key to improving student learning; standards set for the curriculum content, student achievement, teachers competence, instructional skills and school performance were also some essential factors identified by Joita (2000) that led to a successful school reform, that would allow student learning improvement.

Before moving forward with the results and comments upon the research findings, it would be appropriate to clarify one crucial matter, namely how the school principals are elected. More appropriate term is “appointed” and not “elected”, because an election process which takes place at the County School Inspectorate ends up with an appointed school principal for each school, who has presented the most solid and school adapted managerial plan. So, a better term instead of election would be “selection”. The future effective school leadership which can lead to school direction improvement as well as student learning enhancement depend on the sequel of this selection. If the choice made by the County School Inspectorate is a good one does not depend only on the criteria taken into account for selecting a candidate, but also on what the respective appointed principal puts into practice and in order to be able to put into practice all the ideas the principals have to prove themselves true leaders.

A true leader is a good leader if he or she is an effective leader. What qualities make an effective leader? Are these qualities enough to succeed? What is the difference between the theory and the project, as well as the actual school realities? These were the main questions that were subject to the second set of questionnaires, those which were applied after a period of two years. Of course that many principals had to face the challenges of the “battlefield” and they found out it was not appropriate to take the answers and solutions “by the book”. If we are to make a top five list with what qualities and what pieces of advice should the principals follow in order to implement their strategies, the list with the answers provided is the following, in ascending order : developing goals and making a strategy, but adjusting it to the real needs; being receptive to communication and suggestions; building relationships; creating a learning culture; leading with your brains and with your heart; But these things are not enough to make everything work easily and as planned; these pieces of advice and qualities need to be backed up according to Tudorica (2007) by a common sense, spotting the weak points and speculating the good opportunities. After two years, the principals achieved those challenges, hardships and difficulties, but they also knew what the real possibilities and solutions were. Besides trying to make high performing schools, the principals had to solve real-world leadership problems and find such successful solution in further preventing negative attitudes and actions.

For the school management, the principals stated that a good organizational behaviour was necessary in order to set guidelines for school and for the teaching staff; also strong communication skills were a must in order to have a good relationship with the local community, parents, teachers and students; the best way to observe or discover it was to go to classrooms and find the actual situation themselves. In other words, what the principals seemed to have identified as good practice is a cohesive leadership system, in which even the distribution of leadership is an effective asset.

The basis of the educational plan having been set, the principals and the leadership team were required to specify the major challenges they had to face when starting to implement and put into practice the stated goals; time, effectiveness, competence, commitment and cooperation were factors that were taken into account upon proposal of changes and school concept re -designing and their impact on student achievement was also noted.

Time needs to be masterly managed so, for example, some principals have chosen to modify organizational structure, by changing schedules to allow teachers sharing the same planning time and to use such time in order to discuss the improvement of teaching approaches. As Ghergut (2007) states, sharing actions makes collaboration easier, and valuable ideas may arise from sharing best practice and successful outcomes among teachers. Sharing leadership represents a great possibility for stimulating and authorizing others to make significant decisions. Effective development and implementation of school improvement plans is also a decisive factor that has a positive effect on student achievement and it is based on competence and sustained commitment. Cooperation and sharing leadership with teachers was mainly subject to the improvement of school instruction.

Comprehensive approaches to education reform are also some of the practices used by the team leadership to turn their schools into effective organizations, where students are stimulated and provided with individualized support and appropriate model in order to improve learning. School instruction is seen by students as the main factor influencing their learning, but this factor is, in its turn, subdued to other influences, such as the key role owned by a principal who shares leadership with teachers and the local community; in such cases student achievement is higher in their performance.

As regards another issue and point of view presented by the school leaders, namely school and classroom conditions, the goal for school leader was to create and sustain a competitive school, by school improvement plans, by involving themselves in setting professional standards, in stimulating the teaching staff intellectually, by offering professional development opportunities and staff assessment. The research has proved that there is clear evidence of the fact that, before setting student learning as a priority, such actions and productive plans for educational purpose as the ones described above are essential. More than 80 % of the leadership teams agree to focus on such matters. Such teams promote successful leadership.

Moving forward to the student learning, the research focused on what happens inside the classroom, how leaders' professional learning experiences influence student achievement. The main role in the classroom is assumed by the teacher, whose pedagogical knowledge, training skills and classroom working are key features for students' performance. Adjacent factors that are linked to students' classroom performance are the contents and nature of activities, as well as student assessment. An essential role and a potential determinant of student learning is played by parents, who are encouraged to take part in school council and also in school decision – making; student and family background are also responsible for the students' learning process. The problems encountered when taking into account this factor were the minority and low-income students; this represents a small percent in every school, but it dimensions the results of school student achievement expectations; we are not hereby talking about minority students such as Hungarians or Germans, because it is not the case in this region (southern part); minority here refers to students whose ethnicity is Roma, that is gypsy, or students who come from the Republic of Moldavia, where Romanian is the official language; they are more likely emigrants and the Romanian government provides them and their families with a lot of facilities, if they come and settle in our country. Even though elementary education is provided free in Romania, a lot of families, including gypsy families choose not to send their children to school; in this regard, a lot of governmental campaigns and non-profit organizations projects have been promoting school inclusion for gypsy children, so that each school leader has to try and persuade families to send their children to school, each school having a preset number reserved for those children. These minorities, along with low-income students have had problems integrating into school process and there was a lack of focus on their achievement, as well as low expectations from the teaching staff regarding their school performance. Of course, they shared the same classroom conditions and instructional techniques as the other students, but very few of them managed to see in the high performing students an example to follow. This was the main objective and these were the main questions requiring an answer at the end of the research, meaning at the end of the four- year mandate for the school principals.

4. Conclusion

Stating the fact that all factors meant to improve school and classroom conditions, all educational plans, all leadership common actions (together with teachers, parents, local community) as part of school reform were mainly subject to creating the necessary premises and bringing benefits for students, our research has reached its purpose, that of finding out what direct or indirect factors are essential to successful leadership and how successful leadership may influence student learning.

As this article concludes some ideas from a research that are basically focused on the efficiency and quality of leadership, cohesive leadership had influenced the students outcomes, which in turn underwent major challenges and changes, given the fact that all school principals had been appointed by the County School Inspectorate, after a carefully conducted check – up, these days a new proposal has been made to schools: all persons that will be in charge with school management, school guidance or school control, (that is principals and county school inspectors), should be elected only by the teaching staff of the respective school and they should be recommended for a position as county school inspectors by the school teaching staff. This new vision has been readily embraced by all school, elementary school, college, high school teachers, as they should know better who is serving their educational purpose, who can help them better organize and achieve high performance and high expectancy goals: a teacher among his or her fellow teachers.

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